

'Lawful money' on '50s bills now is 'legal tender'

By Roger Boye

This week's column answers questions about coins and currency.

Q—I have several \$10 bills of series 1950 with an inscription that reads in part, "This note is redeemable in lawful money at the United States Treasury or at any Federal Reserve bank." Are those words still honored? And what is "lawful money"?

—S.G., Merrillville, Ind.

A—Uncle Sam used that phrase in the 1950s and earlier to certify each bill as "legal tender," paper exchangeable for goods and services and honored by the government in payment of taxes. Modern-day currency says simply, "This note is legal tender for all debts, public and private."

The United States is one of only a few nations that has never demonitized any regular series of paper money. All bills issued by the federal government under the Constitution can be exchanged at banks or the U.S. Treasury for freshly printed Federal Reserve notes.

Q—What would be the value of an 1855 privately minted California gold coin? Also, what's the history of such items?

—S.J.T., Chicago

A—The value would range from worthless to thousands of dollars, depending on the design, denomination and authenticity.

Show it to a coin dealer or other expert for an appraisal.

Starting in 1849, many California businessmen issued their own gold coins to relieve acute shortages of government money in the West. The practice was outlawed in 1864 but continued until about 1882 when bureaucrats began enforcing the law.

Most genuine specimens of "California gold" are prized keepsakes, but in recent years pranksters have flooded the market with thousands of worthless imitations.

Q—We uncovered a fascinating coin while refinishing a desk that has been in our basement for 35 years. The 1863 copper piece is slightly larger than a Lincoln cent and says, "Horrors of war, Blessings of peace." Can you identify it? —J.M., Rochelle

A—You've found a Civil War token, one of maybe 10,000 different types issued by merchants to make change between 1861 and 1864 because people hoarded government coins. Most of the so-called "copperheads" carried political or patriotic slogans, often with the issuer's name.

Experts say the bronze or copper tokens in "fine condition" usually fetch from \$1 to \$3 each on today's hobby market. The rarer silver specimens might retail for \$60 or more.

• Members of the Lake County Coin Club will conduct their annual show 10 a.m.-6 p.m. next Sunday at the Swedish Glee Club, 621 Belvidere Rd., Waukegan. As many as 18 dealers will sell collectibles and the club will award door prizes. Admission is free.